

# WELL-BEING OF NATIONS

Ruut Veenhoven <sup>1)</sup>

*In: Alex C. Michalos (Ed.) **Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research**  
Springer, Dordrecht, Netherlands, 2014. Springer Reference Series, pp. 7095-7098.  
ISBN 978-94-007-0752-8  
**DOI:10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5\_3225***

## 1 SYNONYMS

Social health; Social progress; Social well-being; Societal quality

## 2 DEFINITION

How well a society functions.

## 3 DESCRIPTION

### 3.1 Four Kinds of Well-Being

The well-being of any system can be judged from different perspectives. One perspective is to look at the *chances* for the system, while the opposing perspective is to look at the wellness of *outcomes* for the system. Still another set of opposing views is to take either an *external* perspective or focus on the *inner* wellness of the system. When combined, these perspectives result in four kinds of well-being, which are depicted in **Table 1**.

When focusing on external chances, we deal with the *environmental conditions* of a system. Being in favorable conditions is seen as more “well” than being in adverse conditions. When focusing on internal chances, we deal with the *internal functioning* of a system. Working as designed is deemed more “well” than performing poorly. If the focus is on external outcomes, we deal with *environmental effects* of a system. A system that works positively on its environment being is deemed to be more “well” than a system that causes harm. If we focus on the inner outcomes, we deal with system *maintenance* in the first place. In this view, a system that keeps up is more “well” than a system that perishes.

When applied to biological organisms, the chances of being well are denoted using the terms **biotope** (external chances) and **fitness** (internal

1) Erasmus Happiness Economics Research Organisation, Erasmus University, Rotterdam,  
The Netherlands and Optentia Research Group, North-West University, South Africa

chances), while the well-being outcomes are referred to as “adaptation,” respectively, *continuation of the species* (external outcome) and *survival* of the organism itself (inner outcome). An application of this conceptual distinction to individual human well-being is reported in Veenhoven (2000).

When applied to business organizations, the external chances for being well are embodied in the *market*, while internal chances are in the *capital* of the firm. External outcomes can be denoted with the term *public wealth* and internal outcomes with *private profit*.

### 3.2 Well-Being of Nations

When applied to nations, the distinction into four kinds of well-being produces the variants presented in [Table 2](#).

#### 3.2.1 *Ecological and Geopolitical Environment*

The left top quadrant denotes the favorableness of a nation’s environment. This has both physical and social aspects. The physical aspects were most important in the past; no strong societies have developed at the poles or in deserts. Yet modern technology has now reduced the significance of this environmental aspect of societal well-being. The social environment has become more important in the course of societal evolution; intersocietal competition has increase as has interdependency. Therefore, the position of a nation in the world system seems to represent the major environmental chance factor these days. In that view, a nation is better off when more it is central in the world system.

#### 3.2.2 *Functioning of Institutions*

The right top quadrant of [Table 2](#) denotes the ability of the social system to maintain itself in the given environment. This ability is in the social organization and, in the case of present day nations in particular, the functioning of the state. In this view, a nation is “well” if its institutions function properly.

#### 3.2.3 *Contributions to the Ecosystem and to Human Civilization*

The left bottom quadrant of [Table 2](#) denotes the outcomes of society for its environment. These outcomes can concern the physical environment as well as the social environment. In the first case, the well-being of a nation is judged by its impact on the ecosystem, which means that a nation is more “well” the less damage it causes. In the second case the well-being of a nation is judged by its impact on human civilization and in that context a nations is more “well” if it produces significant innovations.

#### 3.2.4 *Continuation and Morale*

Lastly, the right bottom quadrant of [Table 2](#) denotes the meaning of internal

outcomes. How does this work out at the nation level?

The most basic outcome is again system maintenance and in the case of biological organisms that is equated with survival. At first sight, that would also apply to nations: one cannot say that a nation does well when it ceases to exist. Still, nations can become part of a stronger supranational system, and much of their characteristics be preserved in that way. This has happened with the member states of the European Union. So this criterion must be restricted to “single death” such as a nation succumbing to inner tensions.

In the case of individual well-being, inner outcomes also reflect in evaluative appraisals of life, humans being able to reflect on their condition. Societies cannot reflect on themselves in the way individuals do. Still, there are collectively held beliefs in nations about the nation, and these tend to be linked to identification with the country and willingness to fight for the country. In this line, one could argue that a nation is more “well” the higher the “morale” is with the nation.

### 3.3 Indicators of Well-Being of Nations

Well-being is commonly measured with indexes that involve indicators from each of the quadrants in the above **Tables 1** and **2** and add these in a sum score. Though commonly used, these indexes make no sense. The Tables help us to see why. Firstly, there is little point in adding *chances* to *outcomes*. A system that has good chances but bad outcomes can hardly be said to be “well.” Secondly, there is no point either in the adding of *external conditions* and *inner functioning*. It is the *fit* that matters and not the *sum*. Comprehensive measurement of well-being of nations is therefore not possible. We must make do with measurements of separate aspect of well-being.

#### 3.3.1 Indicators of External Conditions for Nations

As noted above, any nation functions in a *natural environment* which may be more or less favorable. Many aspects may be involved, such as temperature, rainfall, poisonous plants, germs, and industrial pollution. Only a few of these aspects have been sufficiently quantified to allow comparison across a great number of nations. For the purpose of this entry, I limit to the “biological capacity” of the land, that is, usable area per capita.

As discussed above, the *geopolitical position* of a nation became ever more important. This aspect of well-being also has many aspects that cannot be measured exhaustively. Still, some meaningful indicators are (a) the economic competitiveness of the nation and (b) its military power.

#### 3.3.2 Indicators of Internal Functioning of Nations

The inside functioning of nations also has many aspects that can hardly be measured comprehensively. Still there are good indicators for some major features, such as the effectiveness of government, rule of law, and control of corruption. Another indicator is the functioning of the political system in giving voice to citizens and requiring accountability from rulers. These indicators are

part of the World Bank's system of indicators of institutional quality.

### *3.3.3 Indicators of External Effects of Nations*

Nations influence their wider environment in many ways, and it is again not possible to chart these all.

An indicator of ecological burden on the planet imposed by nations is their "ecological footprint," that is, the surface on earth used for the consumption of the average citizen. Now that surface is becoming scarce, the use of much surface becomes ever more damaging. Environmental impoverishment is also involved in the use of nonrenewable resources, and this can be measured fairly well using the nation's energy consumption.

Contributions to human civilization are also difficult to measure, among other things, because these manifest typically in the long term. Still the contribution to human development of technical innovation is probably well reflected in the number of patents per capita. It is also possible to quantify contributions to science using numbers of citations and contributions to arts by the numbers of novels written and movies made. A limitation of these figures is that they do not reflect the long-term addition to the human heritage.

### *3.3.4 Indicators of Continuity of Nations*

At first sight, the continuity of a nation can be measured in the years since its establishment, and there are comparable data on that matter. Yet a formal proclamation of nationhood does not always fit with actual existence of a nation, and nations can have existed before such declarations in other recognizable forms. Continuity of nations can also be measured by the presence of threats to their existence, such as political instability, ethnic fragmentation, and civil war. Several of these indicators are combined in the "Failed State" index (Foreign Policy, 2010).

## **3.4 Well-being in Nations**

The above discussed well-being of the social system should not be equated with the well-being of citizens in nations (Veenhoven, 2009). Though people flourish typically better in nations that do well, this is not necessarily always the case. The concept of individual well-being and required social conditions are discussed elsewhere in this encyclopedia.

## REFERENCES

Foreign Policy. (2010). *Failed states index 2010*, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=3865](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3865)

Veenhoven, R. (2000).  
*The four qualities of life. Ordering concepts and measures of the good life.*  
Journal of Happiness Studies, 1, 1-39.

Veenhoven, R. (2009).  
*Well-being in nations and well-being of nations: Is there a conflict between individual and society?*  
Social Indicators Research, 91, 5-21.

## Cross-References.

Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number.  
Happiness.  
Quality of Life (QOL).  
World Database of Happiness

**Table 1** Four kinds of well-being

	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>
<i>Chances</i>	Favorable environment	Good functioning
<i>Outcomes</i>	Positive external effects	Continuance

**Table 2** Four kinds of societal well-being

	<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>
<i>Chances</i>	Ecological condition	Functioning
	Geo-political position	
<i>Outcomes</i>	Burden to eco-system	Continuity
	Contribution to civilization	Morale